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THE AIMS OF INDIAN ART

BY ANANDA K. COOMARASWAMY, D.Sc.

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Nataraja

THE AIMS OF INDIAN ART.

THE extant remains of Indian art cover a period of more than two thousand years. During this time many schools of thought have flourished and decayed, invaders of many races have poured into India and contributed to the infinite variety of her intellectual resources; countless dynasties have ruled and passed away; and so we do not wonder that many varieties of artistic expression remain to record for us in a language of their own, something of the ideas and the ideals of many peoples, their hopes and fears, their faith and their desire. But just as through all Indian schools of thought there runs like a golden thread the fundamental idealism of the Upanishads, the Vedānta, so in all Indian art there is a unity that underlies all its bewildering variety. This unifying principle is here also Idealism, and this must of necessity have been so, for the synthesis of Indian thought is one, not many.

What, after all, is the secret of Indian greatness? Not a dogma or a book; but the great open secret that all knowledge and all truth are absolute and infinite, waiting not to be created, but to be found; the secret of the infinite superiority of intuition, the method of direct perception, over the intellect, regarded as a mere organ of discrimination. There is about us a storehouse of the As-Yet-Unknown, infinite and inexhaustible; but to this wisdom, the way of access is not through intellectual activity. The intuition that reaches to it, we call Imagination and Genius. It came to Sir Isaac Newton when he saw the apple fall, and there flashed across his brain the Law of Gravity. It came to the Buddha as he sat through the silent night in meditation, and hour by hour all things became apparent to him; he knew the exact circumstances of all beings that have ever been in the endless and infinite worlds; at the twentieth hour he received the divine insight by which he saw all things within the space of the infinite sakvalas as clearly as if they were close at hand; then came still deeper insight, and he perceived the cause of sorrow and the path of knowledge, 'He reached at last the exhaustless source of truth.' The same is true of all 'revelation'; the Veda (*śruti*), the eternal *Logos*, 'breathed forth by Brahman,' in whom it survives the

Inspiration destruction and creation of the Universe, is 'seen,' or 'heard,' not made, by its human authors. . . . The reality of such perception is witnessed to by every man within himself upon rare occasions and on an infinitely smaller scale. It is the inspiration of the poet. It is at once the vision of the artist, and the imagination of the natural philosopher.

Art and science There is a close analogy between the aims of art and of science. Descriptive science is, of course, concerned only with the record of appearances; but art and theoretical science have much in common. The imagination is required for both; both illustrate that natural tendency to seek the one in the many, to formulate natural laws, which is expressed in the saying that the human mind functions naturally towards unity. The aim of the trained scientific or artistic imagination is to conceive (*concipio*, lay hold of) invent (*invenio*, to light upon) or imagine (visualise) some unifying truth previously unsuspected or forgotten. The theory of evolution or of electrons or atoms; the rapid discovery (un-veiling) by a mathematical genius of the answer to an abstruse calculation; the conception that flashes into the artist's mind, all these represent some true vision of the Idea underlying phenomenal experience, some message from the 'exhaustless source of truth.' Ideal art is thus rather a spiritual discovery, than a creation. It differs from science in its concern primarily with subjective things, things as they are for us, rather than in themselves. But both art and science have the common aim of unity; of formulating natural laws.

Mental images It is said of a certain famous craftsman that when designing, he seemed not to be making, but merely to be outlining a pattern that he already saw upon the paper before him. The true artist does not think out his picture, but 'sees' it; his desire is to represent his vision in the material terms of line and colour. To the great painter such pictures come continually, often too rapidly and too confusedly to be caught and disentangled. Could he but control his mental vision, define and hold it! But "fickle is the mind, froward, forceful, and stiff; I deem it as hard to check as is the wind"; yet by "constant labour and passionlessness it may be held," and this concentration of mental vision has been from long ago the very method of Indian

religion, and the control of thought its ideal of worship. It is thus that the Hindu worships daily his Ishṭa Devatā, the special aspect of divinity that is to him all and more than the Patron Saint is to the Catholic. Simple men may worship such an one as Gaṇesa, 'easy to reach, not far away; some can make the greater effort needed to reach even Naṭarāja; and only for those whose heart is set upon the Unconditioned, is a mental image useless as a centre of thought. These last are few; and for those that adore an Ishṭa Devatā, or conditioned and special aspect of God, worship of Him consists first in the recitation of the brief mnemonic *mantram* detailing His attributes, and then in silent concentration of thought upon the corresponding mental image. These mental images are of the same nature as those the artist sees, and the process of visualisation is the same. Here, for example, is a verse from one of the imager's technical books (the *Rūpāvaliya*): *Mental images*

"These are the marks of Śiva, a glorious visage, three eyes, a bow and an arrow, a serpent garland, ear-flowers, a rosary, four hands, a *triśūla*, a noose, a deer, hands betokening mildness and beneficence, a garment of tiger skin, His *vāhan* a bull of the hue of the chank."*

It may be compared with the Dhyāna mantrams used in the daily meditation of a Hindu upon the Gāyatrī visualised as a Goddess:

"In the evening Sarasvatī should be meditated upon as the essence of the Sāma Veda, fair of face, having two arms, holding a *triśūla* and a drum, old, and as Rudrāṇī, the bull her *vāhan*."

Almost the whole philosophy of Indian art is contained in the verse of Sukrācārya's *Sukranītisāra* which enjoins this method of visualisation upon the imager:

"In order that the form of an image may be brought fully and clearly before the mind, the image maker should meditate; and his success will be in proportion to his meditation. No other way—not indeed seeing the object itself—will achieve his purpose."†

* *I. E., riding upon a snow-white bull.*

† *In other words: "The artist should attain to the images of Gods by means of spiritual contemplation only. This spiritual vision is the best and truest standard for him. He should depend upon it; and not, indeed, upon the visible objects perceived by the external senses."*

Māyā

It cannot be too clearly understood that the mere representation of nature is never the aim of Indian art. Probably no truly Indian sculpture has been wrought from a living model, or any religious painting copied from the life. Possibly no Hindu artist of the old schools ever drew from nature at all. His store of memory pictures, his power of visualisation and his imagination were for his purpose finer means; for he desired to suggest the Idea behind sensuous appearance, not to give the detail of the seeming reality, that was in truth but *māyā*, illusion. For in spite of the pantheistic accommodation of infinite truth to the capacity of finite minds, whereby God is conceived as entering into all things, Nature remains to the Hindu a veil, not a revelation; and art is to be something more than a mere imitation of this *māyā*, it is to manifest what lies behind. To mistake the *māyā* for reality were error indeed:

"Men of no understanding, think of Me, the unmanifest, as having manifestation, knowing not My higher being to be changeless, supreme.

"Veiled by the Magic of My Rule (*Yoga-Māyā*), I am not revealed to all the world; this world is bewildered, and perceives Me not as birthless and unchanging" (*Bhagavad Gītā*, *VII.*, 24, 25).

Indo-Persian

Of course, an exception to these principles in Indian art may be pointed to in the Indo-Persian school of portrait miniature; and this work does show that it was no lack of power that in most other cases kept the Indian artist from realistic representation. But here the deliberate aim is portraiture, not the representation of Divinity or Superman. And even in the portraits there are many ideal qualities apparent. In purely Hindu and religious art, however, even portraits are felt to be lesser art than the purely ideal and abstract representations; and such realism as we find, for example, in the Ajanṭa paintings, is due to the keenness of the artist's memory of familiar things, not to his desire to faithfully record appearances. For realism that thus represents keenness of memory picture, strength of imagination, there is room in all art; duly restrained, it is so much added power. But realism which is of the nature of imitation of an object actually seen at the time of painting, is quite antipathetic to imagination, and finds no place in the ideal of Indian art.

Much of the criticism applied to works of art in modern times is based upon the idea of 'truth to nature.' The first thing for which many people look in a work of art, is for something to recognize; and if the representation is of something they have not seen, or symbolizes some unfamiliar abstract idea, it is thereby self condemned as untrue to nature. *Truth to nature*

What, after all, is reality and what is truth? The Indian thinker answers that nature, the phenomenal world that is, is known to him only through sensation, and that he has no warrant for supposing that sensations convey to him any adequate conception of the intrinsic reality of things in themselves; nay, he denies that they have any such reality apart from himself. At most, natural forms are but incarnations of ideas, and each is but an incomplete expression. It is for the artist to portray the ideal world (*Rūpa-loka*) of true reality, the world of imagination; and this very word imagination, or visualisation, expresses the method he must employ.

How strangely this art philosophy contrasts with that characteristic of the modern West, so clearly set forth in Browning's poem:

"But why not do as well as say,—paint these
Just as they are, careless what comes of it?
God's works—paint any one . . .
. . . Have you noticed, now,
Yon cullion's hanging face? A bit of chalk,
And trust me but you should though! How much more
If I drew higher things with the same truth!
That were to take the Prior's pulpit-place,
Interpret God to all of you!"

For such realists, this last is not the function of art; but to us it seems that the very essential function of art is to 'interpret God to all of you.'

Burne-Jones almost alone amongst artists of the modern West seems to have understood art as we in India understand it. To a critic who named as a drawback in the work of a certain artist, that his pictures looked as if he had done them only out of his head, Burne-Jones replied, "The place where I think pictures ought to come from." *Burne-Jones*

Burne-Jones

Of impressionism as understood in the West, and the claim that breadth is gained by lack of finish, Burne-Jones spoke as an Eastern artist might have done. Breadth could be got "by beautiful finish and bright, clear colour well-matched, rather than by muzzy. They (the Impressionists) do make atmosphere, but they don't make anything else: they don't make beauty, they don't make design, they don't make idea, they don't make anything but atmosphere—and I don't think that's enough—I don't think it's very much." Of realism he spoke thus: "Realism? Direct transcript from Nature? I suppose by the time the 'photographic artist' can give us all the colours as correctly as the shapes, people will begin to find out that the realism they talk about isn't art at all, but science; interesting, no doubt, as a scientific achievement, but nothing more. . . . Transcripts from Nature, what do I want with transcripts? I prefer her own signature; I don't want forgeries more or less skilful. . . . It is the message, the 'burden' of a picture that makes its real value."

At another time he said, "You see, it is these things of the soul that are real—the only real things in the universe."

Of the religiousness of art he said:

"That was an awful thought of Ruskin's, that artists paint God for the world. There's a lump of greasy pigment at the end of Michael Angelo's hog-bristle brush, and by the time it has been laid on the stucco, there is something there that all men with eyes recognize as divine. Think of what it means. It is the power of bringing God into the world—making God manifest."

"The object of art must be either to please or to exalt; I can't see any other reason for it at all. One is a pretty reason, the other a noble one."

Of 'expression' in imaginative pictures he said:

"Of course my faces have no expression in the sense in which people use the word. How should they have any? They are not portraits of people in paroxysms—paroxysms of terror, hatred, benevolence, desire, avarice, veneration and all the 'passions' and 'emotion' that Le Brun and that kind of person find so *magnifique* in Raphael's later work. . . . The only expression allowable in great portraiture is the

expression of character and moral quality, not of anything temporary, fleeting, accidental. Apart from portraiture you don't want even so much, or very seldom: in fact you want only types, symbols, suggestions. The moment you give what people call expression, you destroy the typical characters of heads and degrade them into portraits which stand for nothing."* *Burne-Jones*

Common criticisms of Indian art are based on supposed or real limitations of technical attainment in representation, especially of the figure. In part, it may be answered that so little is known in the West of the real achievement of Indian art, that this idea may be allowed to die a natural death in the course of time; and in part, that technical attainment is only a means, not an end. There is an order of importance in the things art means to us—is it not something thus, first, What has the artist to say? and second only, Is his drawing scientifically accurate? Bad drawing is certainly not in itself desirable, nor good drawing a misfortune; but, strange as it may seem, it has always happened in the history of art, that by the time perfection of technique has been attained, inspiration has declined. It was so in Greece, and in Europe after the Renaissance. It almost seems as if concentration upon technique hindered the free working of the imagination a little; if so, however much we desire both, do not let us make any mistake as to which is first. *Technical perfection*

Also, accuracy is not always even desirable. It has been shown by photography that the galloping horse has never been accurately drawn in art; let us hope it never will be. For art has to make use of abstractions and memory pictures, not of photographs; it is a synthesis, not an analysis. And so the whole question of accuracy is relative; and the last word was said by Leonardo de Vinci: "That figure is best which by its action best expresses the passion that animates it." This is the true impressionism of the East, a very different thing from impressionism as now understood in the West.

Indian art is essentially religious. The conscious aim of Indian art is the portrayal of Divinity. But the infinite and unconditioned *Indian art religious*

* *Quotations from "Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones," by Lady Burne-Jones*, 1904.

Indian art and religion

cannot be expressed in finite terms; and art, unable to portray Divinity unconditioned, and unwilling to be limited by the limitation of humanity, is in India dedicated to the representation of Gods, who to finite man represent comprehensible aspects of an infinite whole. Śaṅkarācārya prayed thus: "O Lord, pardon my three sins: I have in contemplation clothed in form Thyself that hast no form; I have in praise described Thee who dost transcend all qualities; and in visiting shrines I have ignored Thine omnipresence." So, too, the Tamil poetess Auvvai was once rebuked by a priest for irreverence, in stretching out her limbs towards an image of God: "You say well, Sir," she answered, "yet if you will point out to me a direction where God is not, I will there stretch out my limbs." But such conceptions, though we know them at heart to be true and absolute, involve a denial of all exoteric truth; they are not enough, or rather they are too much, for ordinary men to live by:

"Exceeding great is the toil of these whose mind is attached to the Unshown; for the Unshown Way is painfully won by them that wear the body.

"But as for them who, having cast all works on Me and given themselves over to Me, worship Me in meditation, with whole hearted *yoga*,

"These speedily I lift up from the sea of death and life, O Pārtha, their minds being set on Me" (*Bhagavad Gītā*, *XII.*, 5-7).

And so it is, that "any Indian man or woman will worship at the feet of some inspired wayfarer who tells them that there can be no image of God, that the world itself is a limitation, and go straightway, as the natural consequence, to pour water on the head of the Siva-lingam."* Indian religion has accepted art, as it has accepted life in its entirety, with open eyes. India, with all her passion for renunciation, has never suffered from that terrible blight of the imagination which confuses the ideals of the ascetic and of the citizen. The citizen is indeed to be restrained; but the very essence of his method is that he should learn restraint or temperance by life,

* *Okakura, 'Ideals of the East,' p.* 65.

not by the rejection of life. For him, the rejection of life, called Puritanism, would be *in*-temperance. *Renunciation*

What then of the true ascetic, with his ideal of renunciation? It has been thought by many Hindus and Buddhists, as it has by many Christians, that rapid spiritual progress is compatible only with an ascetic life. The goal before us all is salvation from the limitation of individuality, and realisation of unity with unconditioned absolute being. Before such a goal can be attained even the highest intellectual and emotional attachments must be put away; art, like all else in time and space, must be transcended. Three states or planes of existence are spoken of in Indian metaphysics: *Kāma-loka*, the sphere of phenomenal appearance; *Rūpa-loka*, the sphere of ideal form; and *Arūpa-loka*, the sphere beyond form. Great art suggests the ideal forms of the *Rūpa-loka*, in terms of the appearances of *Kāma-loka*; but what is art to one that toils upon the Unshown Way, seeking to transcend all limitations of the human intellect, to reach a plane of being unconditioned even by ideal form? For such an one, the most refined and intellectual delights are but flowery meadows where men may linger and delay, while the strait path to utter truth waits vainly for the traveller's feet. This thought explains the belief that absolute emancipation is hardly won by any but human beings yet incarnate; it is harder for the Gods to attain such release, for their pure and exalted bliss and knowledge are attachments even stronger than these of earth. And so we find such an instruction as this:

"Form, sound, taste, smell, touch, these intoxicate beings; cut off the yearning which is inherent in them" (*Dhammika Sutta*).

The extreme expressions of this thought seem to us more terrible than even the 'coldness of Christian men to external beauty'; we feel this, for instance, in reading the story of the Buddhist monk, Chitta Gutta, who dwelt in a certain cave for sixty years without ever raising his eyes above the ground so far as to observe the beautifully painted roof; nor was he ever aware of the yearly flowering of a great *nā*-tree before his cave, except through seeing the pollen fallen upon the ground. But Indian thought has never dreamed of imposing such ideals upon the citizen, whose *dharma* lies, not in

Renunciation

the renunciation of action, but in right action without attachment to its fruits; and for such, who must ever form the great majority of the people, art is both an aid to, and a means of spiritual progress. One thing is of importance for us, that while we run no risk of confusing these two ideals, we should not judge of their relative value or rightness for others; each man must do that for himself; and so we are to respect both monk and citizen, peasant and king, not for their position, but for their fulfilment of their own ideals. This same-sightedness explains to us the seeming paradox, that Hinduism and Buddhism, with their ideals of renunciation, have like Mediæval Christianity been at once the inspiration and the stronghold of art.

Symbolism

India is wont to suggest the eternal and inexpressible infinities in terms of sensuous beauty. The love of man for woman or for nature are one with his love for God. Nothing is common or unclean. All life is a sacrament, no part of it more so than another, and there is no part of it that may not symbolize eternal and infinite things. In this great same-sightedness how great is the opportunity for art. But in this religious art it must not be forgotten that life is not to be represented for its own sake, but for the sake of the Divine expressed in and through it. It is laid down:—

> "It is always commendable for the artist to draw the images of gods. To make human figures is wrong, or even unholy. Even a misshapen image of God is always better than an image of man, however beautiful" (*Sukrācārya*).

The doctrine here so sternly stated, means, in other words, that imitation and portraiture are lesser aims than the representation of ideal and symbolic forms: the aim of the highest art must always be the intimation of the Divinity behind all form, rather than the imitation of the form itself. One may, for instance, depict the sport of Kṛishṇa with the Gopis, but it must be in a spirit of religious idealism, not for the mere sake of the sensuous imagery itself. In terms of European art, it would have been wrong for Giotto or Botticelli, who could give to the world an ideal conception of the Madonna, to have been content to portray obviously earthly persons posing as the Madonna, as was done in later times, when art had

passed downwards from spiritual idealism to naturalism. So also Millais' later work has a lower aim than his earlier. In India also, the work of Ravi Varma, whose gods and heroes are but men cast in a very common mould, is 'unholy' compared with the ideal pictures of Tagore. *Religious aim of art*

What is the ideal of beauty implicit in Indian art? It is a beauty of type, impersonal and aloof. It is not an ideal of varied individual beauty, but of one formalised and rhythmic. The canons insist again and again upon the Ideal as the only true beauty: *Formal beauty*

"An image whose limbs are made in accordance with the rules laid down in the *śāstras* is beautiful. Some, however, deem that which pleases the fancy to be beautiful; but proportions that differ from those given it the *śāstras* cannot delight the cultured" (*Sukrācārya*).

The appeal of formalised ideal beauty is for the Indian mind always stronger than that of beauty associated with the accidental and unessential. The beauty of art, whether fictile or literary, is more compelling and deeper than that of nature herself. These pure ideas, thus disentangled from the web of circumstance by art, are less realised and so more suggestive than fact itself. This is the explanation of the passionate love of nature expressed in Indian art and literature, that is yet combined almost with indifference to the beauty, certainly to the 'picturesqueness' of nature herself.

An essential part of the ideal of beauty is restraint in representation: "The hands and feet should be without veins. The (bones of) the wrist and ankle should not be shown" (*Sukrācārya*). *Elimination of the unessential*

Over minuteness would be a sacrifice of breadth. It is not for the imager to spend his time in displaying his knowledge or his skill; for over-elaborated detail may destroy rather than heighten the beauty of the work; in the presence of the work of Michael Angelo, we can never forget how much anatomy he knows. But this objection to the laborious realisation of parts of a work of art, must not be confused with the pernicious doctrine of the excellence of unfinished work. Oriental art is essentially clear and defined; its mystery does not depend on vagueness.

Adherence to the proportions laid down in the *śāstras* is even inculcated by imprecations: *Obedience*

Obedience to the canons

"If the measurements be out by even half an inch, the result will be loss of wealth, or death" (*Sāriputra*).

"One who knows amiss his craft. . . after his death will fall into hell and suffer" (*Māyāmataya*).

In such phrases we seem to see the framers of the canon, consciously endeavouring to secure the permanence of the tradition in future generations, and amongst ignorant or inferior craftsmen. We shall see later what has been the function of tradition in Indian art. It appears here as an extension in time of the idea of formal beauty and symbolism.

Beauty not the only aim

But it is not necessary for all art to be beautiful, certainly not pretty. If art is ultimately to 'interpret God to all of you,' it must be now beautiful, now terrible, but always with that living quality which transcends the limited conceptions of beauty and ugliness. The personal God whom alone art can interpret, is in and through all nature, "All this Universe is strung upon Me as gems upon a thread." Nature is sometimes soft and smiling, sometimes also red in tooth and claw; in her, both life and death are found. Creation, preservation and destruction are equally His work. His images may therefore be beautiful or terrible.

In nature there are three *guṇas*, or qualities, *Sattva* (truth), *Rajas* (passion), and *Tamas* (gloom). These qualities are always present in nature; their relative proportion determines the character of any particular subject or object. They must, therefore, enter into all material and conditioned representations, even of Divinity, in which, nevertheless, *sattva guṇa* must preponderate. And so we find a classification of images into three, *sattvik*, *rajasik*, and *tamasik*:

"An image of God, seated self-contained, in the posture of a *yogi*, with hands turned as if granting boon and encouragement to his worshippers, surrounded by praying and worshipping Indra and other gods, is called a *sattvik* image.

"An image seated on a *vāhan*, decked with various ornaments, with hands bearing weapons, as well as granting boon and encouragement, is called a *rajasik* image.

"A *tamasik* image is a terrible armed figure fighting and destroying the demons" (*Śukrācārya*).

It is the same with architecture. Here, too, the design is to suggest and symbolize the Universe; the site of a temple or town is laid out in relation to astrological observations; every stone has its place in the cosmic design, and the very faults of execution represent but the imperfections and shortcomings of the craftsman himself. Can we wonder that a beautiful and dignified architecture is thus devised, or can such conceptions fail to be reflected in the dignity and serenity of life itself? Under such conditions the craftsman is not an individual expressing individual whims, but a part of the Universe giving expression to the ideals of its own eternal beauty and unchanging law. *Architecture*

Exactly the same ideas of formal beauty prevail in relation to purely decorative art. The aim of such art is not, of course, in the same sense consciously religious; the simple expression of delight in cunning workmanship, or of the craftsman's humour, or his fear or his desire are motifs that inspire the lesser art that belongs to the common things of life. But yet all art is really one, consistent with itself and with life; how should one part of it be fundamentally opposed to another? And so we find in the decorative art of India the same idealism that is inseparable from Indian thought; for art, like religion, is really a way of looking at things, more than anything else. The love of nature in its infinite beauty and variety has impelled the craftsman to decorate his handiwork with the forms of the well-known birds and flowers and beasts with which he is most intimate, or which have most appealed to his imagination. But these forms he never represents realistically, they are always memory pictures, combined with fanciful creations of the imagination, into symmetrical and rhythmic ornament. *Decorative art*

Take, for example, the treatment of lions in decorative art. Verses of the canon relating to animals often show that the object of the canon has been as much to stimulate imagination, as to define the manner of representation. *Lions*

"The neigh of a horse is like the sound of a storm, his eyes like the lotus, he is swift as the wind, as stately as a lion, and his gait is the gait of a dancer.

"The lion has eyes like those of a hare, a fierce aspect, soft hair long

Lions

on his chest and under his shoulders, his back is plump like a sheep's, his body is that of a blooded horse, his gait is stately, and his tail long" (*Sariputra*).

For comparison I quote another description, from an old Chinese canon:

"With a form like that of a tiger, and with a colour tawny or sometimes blue, the lion is like the *Muku-inu*, a shaggy dog. He has a huge head, hard as bronze, a long tail, forehead firm as iron, hooked fangs, eyes like bended bows, and raised ears; his eyes flash like lightning, and his roar is like thunder."*

Such descriptions throw light on the representation of animals in Oriental decorative art. The artist's lion need be like no lion on earth or in any zoological garden; for he is not illustrating a work on natural history. Freed from such a limitation, he is able to express through his lion the whole theory of his national existence and individual idiosyncracy. Thus has Oriental art been preserved from such paltry and emasculated realism as that of the lions of Trafalgar Square. Contrast the absence of imagination in this handiwork of the English painter of domestic pets, with the vitality of the heraldic lions of Mediæval England, or the lions of Hokusai's 'Daily Exorcisms.' The sculptured lions of Egypt, Assyria, or India are true works of art, for in them we see, not any lion that could to-day be shot or photographed in a desert, but the lion as he existed in the minds of a people, a lion that tells us something of the people who represented him. In such artistic subjectivity lies the significance of Ancient and Eastern decorative art: it is this which gives so much dignity and value to the lesser arts of India, and separates them so entirely in spirit from the imitative decorative art of modern Europe.

Jewellery

Take Indian jewellery as another illustration of idealism in decorative art. The traditional forms have distinctive names, just as a 'curb bracelet' or a 'gipsy ring' may be spoken of in England. In India the names are usually those of special flowers or fruits, or generic terms for flowers or seeds, as '*rui*-flower thread,' 'coconut-

* *Quoted in 'The Kokka,' No.* 198, 1906.

flower garland,' 'petal garland,' 'string of millet grains,' 'ear-flower,' 'hair-flower.' These names are reminiscent of the garlands of real flowers, and the flowers in the hair, that play so important a part in Indian festal dress. These, with the flowers and fruits worn as talismans or as religious symbols, are the prototypes of the flower forms of Indian jewellery, which thus, like all other Indian art, reflects the thought, the life and the history of the people by and for whom it is so beautifully made. *Jewellery*

The traditional forms, then, are named after flowers; but it is highly characteristic that the garlands and flowers are in design purely suggestive, not at all imitative of the prototypes. The realism which is so characteristic of nearly all modern Western art, in jewellery producing the unimaginative imitations of flowers, leaves, and animals of the school of Lalique, is never found in Indian design.

Imitation and design

The passion for imitation may be taken as direct evidence of the lack of true artistic impulse, which is always a desire, conscious or sub-conscious, to express or manifest Idea. Why indeed imitate where you can never rival? Nor is it by a conscious intellectual effort that a flower is to be conventionalised and made into applied ornament. No true Indian craftsman sets a flower before him and worries out of it some sort of ornament by taking thought; his art is more deeply rooted in the national life than that. If the flower has not meant so much to him that he has already a clear memory picture of its essential characters, he may as well ignore it in his decoration; for a decorative art not intimately related to his own experience, and to that of his fellow men, could have no intrinsic vitality, nor meet with that immediate response which rewards the prophet speaking in a mother-tongue. It is, of course, true that the original memory pictures are handed on as crystallised traditions; yet as long as the art is living, the tradition remains also plastic, and is moulded imperceptibly by successive generations. The force of its appeal is strengthened by the association of ideas,—artistic, emotional and religious. Traditional forms have thus a significance not merely foreign to any imitative art, but dependent on the fact that they represent rather race conceptions, than the ideas of one artist or a single period. They are a vital expression of the race

Imitation and design

mind: to reject them, and expect great art to live on as before, would be to sever the roots of a forest tree, and still look for flowers and fruit upon its branches.

Patterns

Consider, also, patterns. I have found that to most people patterns mean extremely little; they are things to be made and cast aside for new, only requiring to be pretty, perhaps only to be fashionable; whereas they are things which live and grow, and which no man can create, all he can do is to use them, and to let them grow. Every real pattern has a long ancestry and a story to tell. For those that can read its language, even the most strictly decorative art has complex and symbolical associations that enhance a thousandfold the significance of its expression, as the complex associations that belong to words, enrich the measured web of spoken verse. This is not, of course, to suggest that such art has a didactic character, but only that it has some meaning and something to say; but if you do not want to listen, it is still as a piece of decoration far better than some new thing that has 'broken with tradition' and is 'original.' May Heaven preserve us from the decorative art of to-day, that professes to be new and original. The truth is expressed by Ruskin in the following words:

Originality

"That virtue of originality that men so strain after is not *newness* (as they vainly think), it is only genuineness; it all depends on this single glorious faculty of getting to the spring of things and working out from that."

Observe that here we have come back to the essentially Indian point of view, getting to the spring of things, and working out from that. You will get all the freshness and individuality you want if you do that. This is to be seen in the vigour and vitality of the design of William Morris, compared with the work of designers who have deliberately striven to be original. Morris tried to do no more than recover the thread of a lost tradition and carry it on; and yet no one could mistake the work of Morris for that of any other man or any other century or country—and is that not originality enough?

Convention

Convention may be defined as the manner of artistic presentation, while tradition stands for a historic continuity in the use of such conventional methods of expression. Many have thought that con-

vention and tradition are the foes of art, and deem the epithets 'conventional and traditional' to be in themselves of the nature of destructive criticism. Convention is conceived of solely as limitation, not as a language and a means of expression. But to one realising what tradition really means, a quite contrary view presents itself; that of the terrible and almost hopeless disadvantage from which art suffers when each artist and each craftsman, or at the best, each little group and school, has first to create a language, before ideas can be expressed in it. For tradition is a wonderful, expressive language, that enables the artist working through it to speak directly to the heart without the necessity for explanation. It is a mother-tongue, every phrase of it rich with the countless shades of meaning read into it by the simple and the great that have made and used it in the past.

Convention and tradition

It may be said that these principles hold good only in relation to decorative art. Let us then enquire into the place and influence of tradition in the fine art of India. The written traditions, once orally transmitted, consist mainly of memory verses, exactly corresponding to the mnemonic verses of early Indian literature. In both cases the artist, imager or story-teller, had also a fuller and more living tradition, handed down in the schools from generation to generation, enabling him to fill out the meagre details of the written canon. Sometimes, in addition to the verses of the canon, books of mnemonic sketches were in use, and handed down from master to pupil in the same way. These give us an opportunity of more exactly understanding the nature and method of tradition. In Fig. 1 is reproduced from an old Tamil craftsman's sketch book, a figure of Śiva as Naṭarāja. In order to understand this, it is necessary to first explain the legend and conception of Śiva's appearance as the 'Dancing Lord.' The story is given in the *Koyil Purāṇam*, and is familiar to all Saivites. Śiva appeared in disguise amongst a congregation of ten thousand sages, and in the course of disputation, confuted them and so angered them thereby, that they endeavoured by incantations to destroy Him. A fierce tiger was created in sacrificial flames, and rushed upon Him, but smiling gently, He seized it with His sacred hands, and with the nail of His little finger stripped off

Naṭarāja

Naṭarāja

its skin, which He wrapped about Himself as if it had been a silken cloth. Undiscouraged by failure, the sages renewed their offerings, and there was produced a monstrous serpent, which He seized and wreathed about His neck. Then He began to dance; but there rushed upon Him a last monster in the shape of a hideous malignant dwarf. Upon him the God pressed the tip of His foot, and broke the creature's back, so that it writhed upon the ground; and so, His last foe prostrate, Śiva resumed the dance of which the gods were witnesses. One interpretation of this legend explains that He wraps about Him as a garment, the tiger fury of human passion; the guile and malice of mankind He wears as a necklace, and beneath His feet is for ever crushed the embodiment of evil. More characteristic of Indian thought is the symbolism, in terms of the marvellous grace and rhythm of Indian dancing, the effortless ease with which the God in His grace supports the cosmos; it is His sport. The five acts of creation, preservation, destruction, embodiment and gracious release are His ceaseless mystic dance. In sacred Tillai, the 'New Jerusalem,' the dance shall be revealed; and Tillai is the very centre of the Universe, that is, His dance is within the cosmos and the soul.*

Fig. 1. Naṭarāja: from a Tamil craftsman's notebook (early XIXth century).

The necessity for such an explanation emphasizes the apparent

* *Pope*, '*Tiruvāçagam*,' *p.* LXIII.; *Nallasawmi Pillai*, '*Sivagnana Botham*,' *Madras*, 1895, *p.* 74.

difficulty of understanding Indian art; but it must be remembered that the element of strangeness in Indian art is not there for its makers and those for whom they worked; it speaks, as all great national art must speak, in a language of its own, and it is evident that the grammar of this art language must be understood before the message can be appreciated, or the mind left free to consider what shall be its estimate of the artistic qualities of a work before it. *Naṭarāja*

Here then is a rough sketch, drawn by an inferior craftsman, and representing very fairly just that amount of guidance which tradition somewhat precisely hands on for the behoof of each succeeding generation of imagers. This conception is fairly often met with in Southern India, sculptured in stone or cast in bronze. Some of these representations have no especial artistic excellence; but so subjective is appreciation of art, so dependent on qualities belonging entirely to the beholder, and transferred by him into the object before him, that the symbolic and religious aim is still attained. Such is one of the functions of tradition, making it possible for ordinary craftsmen to work acceptably within its limits, and avoiding all danger of the great and sacred subjects being treated with loss of dignity or reverence. But tradition has another aspect, as enabling the great artist, the man of genius, to say in the language understanded of the people, all that there is in him to express.

A bronze figure of Naṭarāja is shown in the accompanying Plate; it represents a figure in the Madras Museum, perhaps of the seventeenth century, or even older. It would be superfluous to praise in detail this beautiful figure; it is so alive, and yet so balanced, so powerful and yet so effortless. There is here realism for the realist, but realism that is due to keenness of memory for familiar things, not to their imitation. The imager grew up under the shadow of a Sivan temple in one of the great cathedral cities of the South; perhaps Tanjore; he had worked with his father at the columns of the Thousand Pillared Hall at Madura, and later at the Choultry, when all the craftsmen of Southern India flocked to carry out the great buildings of Tirumala Nāyaka; himself a Saivite, he knew all its familiar ritual, and day after day had seen the dancing of the *devadāsis*

Naṭarāja before the shrine, perhaps in his youth had been the lover of one, more skilled and graceful than the rest; and all his memories of rhythmic dance, and mingled devotion for *devadāsi* and for Deity, he expressed in the grace and beauty of this dancing Śiva. For so are religion and culture, life and art, bound up together in the web of Indian life. Is the tradition that links that art to life of little value, or less than none, to the great genius? Shall he reject the imagery ready to his hand, because it is not new and unfamiliar? Look well at the figure, with its first and simplest motif of victory over evil; observe the ring of flaming fire, the aura of His glory; the four hands with the elaborate symbolism of their attitude; the fluttering *aṅgavastiram*, and the serpent garland, and think whether any individual artist, creating his own convention and inventing newer symbolisms, could speak thus to the hearts of men, amongst whom the story of Śiva's dance is a gospel and a cradle tale.

Buddha The seated Buddha is a more familiar type. Here, too, convention and tradition are held to fetter artistic imagination. Indian art is sometimes condemned for showing no development, because there is, or is supposed to be, no difference in artistic conception between a Buddha of the first century and one of the nineteenth. It is, of course, not quite true that there is no development, in the sense that the work of each period is altogether uncharacterised; for those who know something of Indian art are able to estimate with some confidence the century to which a statue belongs. But it is true that the conception is really the same; the mistake lies in thinking this an artistic weakness. It is an expression of the fact that the Indian ideal has not changed. What is that ideal so passionately desired? It is one-pointedness, same-sightedness, control: little by little to control the fickle and unsteady mind; little by little to win stillness, to rein in, not merely the senses, but the mind, that is as hard to check as is the wind. As a lamp that flickers not in a windless spot, so is the mind to be at rest. Only by constant labour and passionlessness is this peace to be attained. What is the attitude of mind and body of one that seeks it? He shall be seated like the image, for that posture once acquired, is one of perfectly bodily equipoise:

"He shall seat himself with thought intent and the workings of mind and sense instruments restrained, for purification of spirit labour on the *yoga*, *Buddha*

"Firm, holding body, head, and neck in unmoving equipoise, gazing on the end of his nose, and looking not round about him,

"Calm of spirit, void of fear, abiding under the vow of chastity, with mind restrained and thought set on Me, so shall he sit that is under the Rule, given over unto Me.

"In this wise the *yogi*. . . comes to the peace that ends in *nirvāṇa* and that abides in Me" (*Bhagavad Gītā*, *VI.*, 12-15).

How then should the greatest of India's teachers be represented in art? How otherwise than seated in this posture that is in the heart of India associated with every striving after the great Ideal, and in which the Buddha himself was seated on the night when the attacks of Māra were for ever foiled, and that insight came at last, to gain which the Buddha had in countless lives sacrificed his body 'for the sake of creatures'? It was the greatest moment in India's spiritual history; and as it lives in the race-memory, so is it of necessity presented in the race-art.

Such, then, have been the aims and method of Indian Art in the past. Two tendencies are manifested in the Indian art of to-day, the one inspired by the technical achievement of the modern West, the other by the spiritual idealism of the East. The former has swept away both the beauty and the limitation of the old tradition. The latter has but newly found expression; yet if the greatest art is always both National and Religious (and how empty any other art must be), it is there alone that we see the beginnings of a new and greater art, that shall fulfil and not destroy the past. When a living Indian culture arises out of the wreck of the past and the struggle of the present, a new tradition will be born, and new vision find expression in the language of form and colour, no less than in that of words and rhythm. The people to whom the great conceptions came are still the Indian people, and when life is strong in them again, strong also will be their art. It may well be that the fruit of a deeper national life, a wider culture, and a profounder love, will *Conclusion*

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be an art greater than any of the past. But this can only be through growth and development, not by a sudden rejection of the past. A particular convention is the characteristic expression of a period, the product of particular conditions; it resumes the historic evolution of the national culture. The convention of the future must be similarly related to the national life. We stand in relation both to past and future; in the past we made the present, the future we are moulding now, and our duty to this future, is that we should enrich, not destroy, the inheritance that is not India's alone, but the inheritance of all humanity.

Two hundred and seventy-five copies printed at the Essex House Press, in the Norman Chapel at Broad Campden, and finished the 29th day of May, 1908.

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Digitized with financial assistance from
Observer Research Foundation
on 01 June, 2019